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Statement submitted by the Women's Federation for World Peace International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Background

The Women's Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI) strongly supports the Economic and Social Council commitment to further discussion on the theme of implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women during the 2010 annual ministerial review. Furthermore, WFWPI encourages continual diligence by the Council during its discussions to identify, bring to light and facilitate the dissemination and scale-up of innovations, best practices and proven methods for advancing the status of women in the most difficult circumstances and empowering women wherever they may be and to show leadership in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment goals worldwide. The Millennium Development Goals and the 12 areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action have definite synergies and provide clear benchmarks for the United Nations, Governments and members of civil society in their combined efforts to usher in a new era of empowerment and equality for women around the world.

For over 15 years, WFWPI volunteers have established, nurtured, sustained and expanded grass-roots aid efforts in more than 50 nations worldwide, sustaining efforts that have given rise to schools for both girls and boys, economic development for poor women, including vocational training and microloans for the founding of small businesses and cottage industries, health care and hygiene efforts and more. These international service projects have been undertaken by women of the global North to empower the women of the global South and other poverty-stricken areas. In complement to these international service projects, WFWPI volunteers worldwide have initiated and participated in reconciliation activities known as the Interracial Sisterhood Project "Bridge of Peace", which provides a ceremonial context for women of previously enemy nations or cultures to meet one on one and begin a lasting friendship that recognizes their similarities and puts to rest past enmity or misunderstanding between the two new "sisters".

The recommendations offered in this statement are drawn from the experiences of our women in the field, as well as review of events such as the WFWPI parallel event during the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, entitled "Sharing of good practices to achieve Millennium Development Goal No. 3, promote gender equality and empower women".

Key issues

As we reflect on progress towards fulfilment of the vision behind both the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, it is plain to see that, although progress has been made, there are still many areas in the world where people suffer desperately, with their fundamental needs unmet, including the safety and security that comes with the rule of law, access to enough food, clean water, basic shelter, health care, opportunities for education, vocational training and opportunities for jobs and work that pays a living wage, including opportunities for entrepreneurship. There is a long way to go in order to achieve equality for women in government, institutional and organizational leadership and participation in decision-making at all levels at the United Nations and in both developed and developing countries.

WFWPI proposes that it is precisely through strengthening women's empowerment and improving gender equality that the world will gain access to the significant untapped resources that women have to offer in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the vision articulated in the Beijing Platform for Action and creating a better world for all people.

Models worthy of consideration

By the Charter of the United Nations, the Economic and Social Council is strategically placed to continue its work in convening stakeholders and representatives worldwide to face the most pressing economic and social issues and build consensus on policy recommendations to present to the General Assembly. In the light of the fact that the Council is responsible for (a) promoting higher standards of living, full employment and economic and social progress, (b) identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems, (c) facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation and (d) encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, WFWPI offers the following insights and recommendations.

One global human family. The model of the family has relevance in our efforts to implement agreed goals and commitments with regard to gender equality and empowerment of women, whether our role is within the United Nations or as part of a Government or civil society. The model of the family includes the wisdom and seasoned love of grandparents, the sacrificial love and attention of parents and, within the embrace of the family unit, all children as well. This model implies that we seek those wise and compassionate elders among our communities and throughout the world and ask their guidance in facing and overcoming barriers to the achievement of our goals, whether they be tribal elders from aboriginal cultures, wise former statespeople who served their countries well or passionate grass-roots leaders in civil society. Let us also be watchful for those among us who demonstrate parental hearts towards those they serve in the national and international spheres. Let us honour and celebrate these women and men who have sacrificed their own comfort to advocate for and meet the needs of the more vulnerable day in and day out and act in the best interest of others, the way a good parent does for his or her children. If institutions and organizations, whether public or private, can incorporate the wisdom and genuine sacrificial commitment to others that exist in the hearts of the most loving and embracing grandparents and parents, we will have taken a huge stride towards thinking and acting in ways that leave no person behind.

Reconciliation. Because human history has included so much violent conflict — and in recent times this conflict has occurred among communities and neighbours — models of reconciliation are paramount. WFWPI has developed and disseminated the Bridge of Peace Ceremony, held between women and men of previously warring communities or nations. This is a solemn ceremony that allows participants to leave behind wounds and concepts from the past, cross the bridge of peace and meet a new sister (or brother, for men) to put aside differences and embrace one another as family and begin anew in friendship. Hundreds of these ceremonies have been held throughout the world over the last decade and a half to foster forgiveness and understanding and bridge differences across national, cultural or religious chasms.

A Bridge of Peace success story that is of particular note is the birth and continuation of the WFWPI annual Women's Conference for Peace in the Middle East. The thirteenth conference was held in May 2009, with participants from nations throughout the Middle East, to discuss barriers to peace and methods and mechanisms for fostering peace in the Middle East across national, cultural and religious barriers.

The natural feminine instinct towards reconciliation, healing, embrace and collaboration towards the achievement of common goals in spite of differences is a crucial asset in the peace process.

Women's participation in decision-making and leadership. In many cultures and nations, girls and women have been taught to believe that their voice does not count, that they are not meant to participate in the public sphere or that they are not allowed to participate by virtue of their gender. To reverse the hold on women, young and old, that this viewpoint has had, girls and women need deliberate training and education that changes this view and self-image. Girls and women must be educated so that they realize not just that they have the right to participate in decision-making and leadership, but also that what they have to offer is crucial to achieving the internationally agreed goals and commitments regarding gender equality and women's empowerment. In addition, girls and women must be taught how to participate and how to advocate for their concerns to be addressed and their problems faced. WFWPI advocates for continued efforts that empower women, including leadership training that equips women to serve as leaders in civil society or teaches them how to run for and serve in public office. In addition, WFWPI volunteers work at the grass-roots level to provide education for girls and women which helps to strengthen their self-image and facilitates self-empowerment.

More can be done at the United Nations, international and national levels to strengthen and enforce laws that protect the basic human rights of women and establish quotas for women's participation in decision-making at all levels, as well as create mechanisms for accountability towards such quotas.

Women and sustainable development. The issue of women and sustainable development is a complex one. Although sustainable development implies economic development that entails acceptable levels of global resource depletion and environmental pollution, it is obvious that, unless women are at the table for decision-making and policymaking about this issue, they are largely left to cope with the results of less-than-sustainable approaches that occur as a result of government and corporate decisions that sacrifice sustainability for short-term gain.

A contribution that non-governmental organizations such as WFWPI can and do make to this issue at the grass-roots level is to incorporate models of sustainable practice into aid projects that involve economic development. For instance, in an agricultural project that has the goal of giving a community a hand up, volunteers can teach crop rotation, concepts of organic agriculture and basic hygiene, building a holistic approach for a community of beneficiaries, such as the WFWPI partnership with the United Nations Development Programme to assist a community in western Kenya several years ago.

The dignity of women. WFWPI chapters in Europe have invested considerable resources in education and awareness-raising regarding the need to elevate respect for the basic dignity of women in the face of continued media

objectification of women and serious problems such as the scourge of trafficking in women for sexual purposes. The focus of this effort is not just women, but also men and boys. Education about the dignity of women improves the self-image of women and girls and also helps men and boys to understand women's fundamental value. A deeper appreciation of the dignity of women empowers women to assert themselves in decision-making processes at all levels, from within their homes to policymaking at the national and international levels. When women are held in higher esteem in their families and communities, this translates to a greater degree of respect and consideration. Although laws may change in support of women's equality and empowerment, without a cultural shift towards respect for the fundamental value of women, equality and empowerment cannot occur.

Proposed new United Nations gender entity. From an organizational standpoint, one of the most important ways that the Economic and Social Council can support the implementation of the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women is to support the formation, implementation and funding by the General Assembly of the proposed new United Nations gender entity. The gender entity will streamline and consolidate the work of the United Nations system towards gender equality and empowerment of women by bringing the offices and agencies of the United Nations that focus on the advancement of women into one and placing its leadership at the Secretariat level. The gender entity will facilitate the acceleration of progress towards the achievement of gender equality throughout the world. This streamlining will add efficiencies through the consolidation of the Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and collaboration with Member States, as well as civil society.

Conclusion

In connection with the 2010 annual ministerial review held during the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, WFWPI recommends continued reflection on and embrace of the vision that we are all members of one human family, which implies the importance of utilizing the best and deepest wisdom we have to offer, a genuine sense of caring for one another that should be nurtured and acted upon, along with practical implementation. WFWPI urges the Council to continue and amplify its efforts to partner with civil society and leverage lessons learned and best practices discovered.